



PRESENTATION OF THE MARGARET E. MAHONEY AWARD

MARGARET E. MAHONEY

The terrible blizzard that hit the East Coast in the winter of 1996 shut down Washington, DC, but not Donna Shalala. She put on her cross-country skis and went looking for newspapers. She found them, not very close by. She got two sets of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*; one set was to go to her neighbor, who happened to be her general counsel. She reached the neighbor's door and announced, "Newspaper delivery service." And from the door came, "What do I tip a cabinet officer?"

This story is not only about generosity, but about caring, applied with an endearing lack of stuffiness. What makes Donna Shalala tick? It could be called gumption, but behind that feisty spirit is a well-honed mind and a conscience.

Donna Shalala had to be a precocious child. Her *curriculum vitae* suggests that maturation set in early, or she could not have moved so rapidly into accountable adulthood. Confirmation for this lies in one item: her receipt of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship just 5 years after graduate school. As the present head of Guggenheim said to me, "It would take a lot to persuade the selection committee to take on someone so fresh out of training. A lot must have transpired in her very young life to enable her to make a convincing case for fellowship support."

Some of what transpired is revealed in her *curriculum vitae*. For example, after college she served in the Peace Corps as a volunteer. She received recognition of worth through scholarships. She grew up in a family rich with tradition, and her mother went to law school after she had reared her children and became one of the leading tax lawyers in Cleveland. Her mother also became an outstanding competitive tennis player, which probably influenced Donna's interest in the sports world.

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As for Donna's conscience, she has the personal qualities that philosopher and Czech President Václav Havel ascribes as the necessary ingredients for political leadership: individual spirituality, personal insight into events and people, and the courage to be one's self and go the way of one's conscience.

Donna Shalala is a skilled practitioner in the art and science of governance. She is very good at politics, a fact that surfaced in her New York days as Hunter College's president. She had a constituency, however, far beyond Hunter. She knew a lot of people, and they knew her—even cab drivers. All this helped her in dealing with City Hall, City University, the state legislature, and faculty at her academic institution. She was very visible. For example, in the 1980s, when much was wrong in New York—bridges were crumbling, and the subways were in bad shape—Donna was part of an omnipresent contingent that included Vartan Gregorian, who was then the head of the New York Public Library; Bob Warner, that citizen extraordinaire; and the city's upbeat mayor, Ed Koch. Together, in their own way, they infused the city, making people think that all could be better, and shared a dream that made some good things happen.

A quick study, bursting with energy, blessed with a sense of the absurd, Donna has an internal engine that keeps her simultaneously energized and focused. Talk to anyone about Donna Shalala, anyone from any given point in her career as a major administrator, and they all say the same: she is a strategist who gets the big picture clearly in focus by consulting people who know the most about an issue and can help her understand the complexity, for example, of the issues surrounding tobacco and vaccines or, in earlier times, faculty differences. She listens, then she establishes priorities, and then she communicates. She has been able to do all of this in three important positions, each escalating in their demands on her and her abilities. She has been able to do this because, her observers say, she frees herself from management by picking the right people to manage, and then she delegates. She has honed her political skills every step of her career. This was certainly true at Hunter College, when she dealt with the city, the state, the governor's office, and that most politicized group of all, the faculty.

At Wisconsin, she went to school on football. When she appeared at training camp in a jogging suit, the photo opportunity was the means to an end. Touted as "Boom-Boom Shalala" by the press, she made improving the football team her number one priority. And what happened? The alumni responded: they pounded down her door to support her and the institution. Having hired the best coach, leaving him to build the winning team, she turned to other business, winning legislative support to revamp major components of undergraduate education and gear up the research agenda. With the governor's support, she moved on the issue of diversity and announced the Madison Plan. As at Hunter, she

won over a questioning faculty and the alumni as well by addressing their interests and their problems.

In Washington today, it is an understatement to say that Secretary Shalala is operating in a confounding political environment. It is certainly unlike any that any of her predecessors faced. But, as a colleague puts it, it's not in her to say, "I've had it." Though she is a team player, she goes down to the wire on issues that matter and then is prepared to take the heat from natural allies who are provoked when a cause is lost. A builder of bridges who keeps channels open, she has made measurable gains that affect the lives of real people.

Donna Shalala is a selfless and confident leader. We honor her as a public servant, one who knows that institutions make a difference in people's lives and is dedicated to making that difference a positive one. We honor her with love and with admiration.